



Cape Verdean fete draws throngs to Roger Williams Park

The celebration of the island nation's independence from Portugal, in 1975, showcases Cape Verdean culture.

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PROVIDENCE -- Thousands of people gathered at Roger Williams Park's Temple to Music yesterday afternoon to celebrate their Cape Verdean heritage and mark the anniversary of the West African island nation's independence from Portugal, in 1975.

Traditionally held at India Point Park in Fox Point, where most Cape Verdean immigrants originally settled, the celebration had to be relocated to Roger Williams due to the Route 195 reconstruction project, said Mercedes A. Monteiro, chairwoman of the Cape Verdean Subcommittee of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission.

Monteiro, who has been heading the Independence Day celebrations here for 11 years, said they typically attract about 5,000 people from all over the country. The largest Cape Verde enclaves are in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and California.

Irene Miranda, 78, of East Providence didn't have to travel far. She attended the celebration with her goddaughter, Raquel Rocha-Holmes, of East Taunton, Mass., as well as Rocha-Holmes' husband and two children.

While her family has been in this country for several generations, Miranda said celebrating Cape Verde's independence is a tradition she is not ready to let go.

This time around, she said, she was curious to see what new turn the celebration would take at the the new venue.

For many, it offers a welcome opportunity to see old friends. But Miranda said many oldtimers she knows were not there. And she said the music -- a mix of traditional Cape Verdean music with more modern rythms -- was not to her taste.

"I enjoy the new, but my heart is with the old," Miranda said.

Bob and Rachel Cruz, of Wakefield, came with their sons, Rob, 13, Nick, 12, and Ben, 8. Bob Cruz said it was the first time the family had attended the event.

It gives their children a chance "to experience their heritage with a lot of other Cape Verdeans," Bob Cruz said.

Slightly larger than Rhode Island, Cape Verde comprises 10 islands and 5 islets about 300 miles off the west coast of Africa.

Colonized by the Portuguese in the 15th century, the archipelago became a trading center for African slaves and later an important coaling and resupply stop for whaling ships and transatlantic shipping.

Cape Verde gained its independence on July 5, 1975. It has a long emigration history that continues to this day. Monteiro said the expatriate community is thought to be larger than the domestic population.

In New England, population estimates of those of Cape Verdean descent range from 60,000 to 70,000, with the largest concentrations in New Bedford and Providence, the traditional entry points, and growing communities in Dorchester and Brockton, Mass., and in Pawtucket.

"There is a growing population of Cape Verdeans in Rhode Island," Monteiro said; "but unfortunately, we keep getting undercounted, as African or Hispanics."

While many Cape Verdeans have been in the United States for a number of generations, she said, the economic and cultural ties with their home country remain strong.

"I consider myself Cape Verdean even though I was born here," Monteiro said, adding she has instilled that pride of heritage in her two children.

She said she would like to see the annual celebration, now in its 31st year, attract more cultural artifacts from Cape Verde.

Yesterday, people flocked to vendors offering Cape Verdean-manufactured objects, particularly beaded jewelry.

"This is the stuff that flies off the shelf because you can't get them over here," said Joe Gomes, a vendor from Boston. The beads, he said, come directly from Cape Verde.

Victor Barros Sr., who started a family business specializing in Cape Verdean jewelry, travels back and forth several times a year to import the sought-after beads. The distinctive creations range in price from \$5 to \$35.

Lore has it that the beads ward off the evil eye.

The price of admission to yesterday's festival was \$1, with children under 12 admitted free. The proceeds, Monteiro said, helped defray festival costs, which average \$10,000 to \$12,000. Any leftover money, she said, would be used to sponsor a health fair and educational programs.

Raising money through food and beverage sales yesterday was Cape Verdeans United, a nonprofit group whose goal is to donate a playground to each island in Cape Verde. Now in its fifth year, the group, whose six members hail from Rhode Island and Connecticut, have donated a \$15,000 playground to a school on Brava. Planning has begun for a second one, and the group is raising money for a third, on Fogo.

"It's about giving back to our home country, to those who are less fortunate," said Stephanie Ramos, the organization's secretary.

"We believe that children grow stronger through play and education," Ramos said. Sisters Ginny Lamba and Tilla Adams, who are natives of Cape Verde, founded the organization. They said they remember growing up with few places to play and few things to play with.

Once the group's ambitious playground project is completed, Lamba said, a new campaign, Books on Wheels, will focus on bringing books to the children of Cape Verde.

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